WHAT? *Why?* WHEN? HOW? WHERE? WHO?

# False Face Society of the IROQUOIS

E. S. ROGERS

Royal Ontario Museum / University of Toronto

*I keep six honest serving-men*

*(They taught me all I knew);*

*Their names are* WHAT *and* WHY *and* WHEN

*And* HOW *and* WHERE *and* WHO. RUDYARD KIPLING

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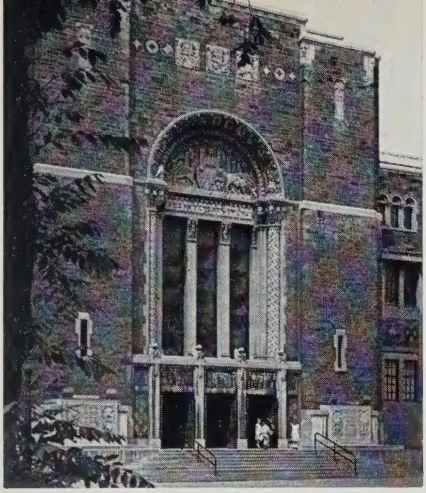

WHAT? HOW?

*Why?* WHERE?

WHEN? WHO?

# The False Face Society of the Iroquois

*by* E. S. ROGERS

## WHAT was the False Face Society?

Sickness is a universal human problem, and man has always sought ways of dealing with it. Today we think of scientific medicine with its elaborate equipment and prescriptions based upon the microscope and the discovery of germs. Yet still we are plagued with psychosomatic illnesses—ones in which the mind makes the body sick—and have developed an elaborate ritual to deal with them. People through countless ages everywhere have also had to cope with disease, whether physical or psychological. The Iroquois Indians were no exception. They had medicines, known to all, which cured in a manner comparable to our own scientific medicines. They also had rituals which cured psychosomatic illnesses in much the same way as ours—by changing the patient's state of mind. The best known and perhaps most effective of the Iroquois curing rituals was performed by the Society of Faces, or False Face Society.

Iroquois religion was greatly concerned with fertility and health. It recognized many gods, foremost among them the Great Creator, symbol of the beneficent and reproductive forces of nature. Ranged against him and his fellow-deities were evil spirits who caused disease and destruction. These

were the Faces, a supernatural race, terrible to look upon, that had lived on earth until recent times. According to some legends they had no bodies, arms, or legs—only faces, seen usually in remote places moving from spot to spot impelled by some mysterious force. They ate men, and sent plagues and sickness among them. In other legends the Faces had bodies, and were as wary of men as men were of them. But all the legends agreed that the spirits could be appeased, and that through dreams they had taught some of the Iroquois this art. "The Good Hunter's Adventure" which follows is typical of these tales.

**In the fall men went into the woods hunting. They carried native tobacco and parched corn meal for mush. They were tormented by shy, querulous beings who flitted timidly behind trees with their long hair snapping in the wind. Sometimes a hunter returned to his camp to find the ashes of his fire strewn about the hearth and the marks of some great, dirty hand where someone had grasped a housepost for support as he leaned over and pawed in the fire.**

**One hunter agreed to stay home while his partner went afield. During the morning, a False Face approached cautiously, sledging on one hip, now and then standing erect to gaze about before proceeding. Going to the hearth, he reached into the ashes and scattered the coals as if seeking something. That night the hunter had a dream in which the False Face requested tobacco and mush. The next day the hunter set a kettle down for them. The Faces came and taught him their songs and their methods of treating patients with hot ashes. In a subsequent dream, they requested him to remember them every year with a feast, saying they are everywhere in the forest, bringing luck to those who remember them.**

Certain Iroquois were instructed in their sleep to carve masks in the likenesses of the Faces. These they put on at festivals, and invoked the help of the spirits by burning tobacco and chanting curing songs. They danced, carrying rattles and speaking in a nasal nonsense language of their own. If all was done properly, they believed, supernatural power to cure disease would be conferred upon the masked men of the False Face Society. They would be able to pick up hot coals without being burned and blow the ashes upon the patients to make them well.

The masks were not worn to hide the faces of the performers, but to represent spirits or forces. Each was a portrait of a mythological being whose help was being summoned.

Two different classes of mask were used, and within each class there were variations. The more important class represented the spirit-being Shagodyoweh, the Great Doctor who dwelt on the rocky rim of the world. The following legend recounts the

LEFT *Inspired by the evil spirits which control disease, an Iroquois carved this mask to wear in the curing rites of his tribal False Face Society. It is said to have been made on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, and was collected by David Boyle in 1899.* RIGHT *Masks which portray the "Great World-Rim Being" frequently show a broken nose and grimace of pain—reminders of his prideful struggle with the Great Creator.*

exploits of this "Great World-Rim Being", and the fate which befell him and shaped his mask.

**Now when our Maker was finishing this earth, he went walking around inspecting it and banishing all evil spirits from his premises. . . . As the Creator went on his way westward, on the rim of the world he met a huge fellow—the head man of all the Faces. The Creator asked the stranger, as he had asked the others, whence he came. The stranger replied that he came from the rocky mountains to the west and that he had been living on this earth since he made it. They argued as to whose earth they traversed and agreed to settle the title by contest. The Creator agreed to call the stranger "Headman", should he demonstrate sufficient magic strength to summon a distant mountain toward them. They sat down facing the east with their backs to the west and held their breaths. Now the great False Face shook his giant turtle rattle and the uproar frightened the game animals. He summoned the mountain toward them, but it moved only part way. Now was the Creator's turn, and he summoned the mountain, which came directly up to them. However, his rival, becoming impatient, suddenly looked around, and the mountain struck his face. The impact broke his nose bridge, and pain distorted his mouth.**

**Now the Creator realized that this fellow had great power. He assigned him the task of driving disease from the earth and assisting the people who were about to travel to and fro hunting. The loser agreed that if humans make portrait masks of him, call him grandfather, make tobacco offerings, and set down a kettle of mush that they too shall have the power to cure disease by blowing hot ashes. The Creator gave him a place to dwell in the rocky hills to the west near the rim of the earth, and he agreed to come in whichever direction the people summoned him.**

This "Great World-Rim Figure" was very tall. He carried a huge "snapping-turtle" rattle and a big staff of pine or shag-bark hickory and walked with long strides, thumping his cane and shaking the earth. He sang of his power over the winds and diseases. The Iroquois believed he was earthbound and travelled from east to west following the path of the sun; his face therefore was red in the morning as he came from the east, and black in the afternoon as he looked back from the direction of the setting sun. Many masks representing the Great Doctor are painted red or black accordingly; they have long hair, and show the broken nose which resulted from his contest with the Creator. A few have high-bridged noses, and lips protruding to blow the ashes; in such cases the lips are distended like two spoons. These are sometimes referred to as Doorkeeper masks. They were worn by men who watched the longhouse door to see that no one entered or left during a performance. These Doorkeepers embodied the Great Doctor's power; their masks, with his, were the most sacred in the curing ceremony and took a leading part in it.

The second class of masks held the spirit power of the common Faces of the forests, the beings met by the "Good Hunter" in his adventure. The common Faces were less powerful than the Great Doctor or the Doorkeepers. Usually they were depicted in the ceremonies as deformed, either hunchbacked or crippled below the waist. A few owned rattles, but others

*This spoon-lipped mask belonged to a Doorkeeper who guarded the longhouse entrance during False Face ceremonies.*

had only a stick. They greatly desired the mush and sacred tobacco offered them. Nevertheless they were important in the ceremony and sometimes these masks—which were carved with a variety of features—gained such prestige that they were considered to have Great Doctor status.

Besides the False Face Society, many other Curing Societies practised ritual arts among the tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy. Nineteen existed among the Cayugas, and 11 among the Senecas. Of these, the Husk Face Society was closely linked to the False Faces for certain ritual purposes.

The Husk Faces were a race of farmers who lived in a ravine on the other side of the earth, tilling their fields amidst high stumps. Each year they came from the east to visit the Seneca longhouse during two nights of the mid-winter festival. They were the messengers of three sisters—Corn, Squash, and Beans—and as such had great power of prophecy. They also had some curing powers, and at times they signalled the approach of the more prominent and better organized Society of Faces.

## WHERE was the False Face Society found?

The rites of the Society were restricted mainly to Indians of the lower Great Lakes. Probably it developed within the Five Nations of the Iroquois —the Mohawk, Oneida, Onandaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. These tribes formerly lived in New York State, but during the American Revolution the majority of their members remained loyal to Britain, fought beside the redcoats, and with the end of war fled to Upper Canada under the leadership of Joseph Brant. The False Face ritual continued to the present with little change even after the Indians were allotted reserves in Ontario and New York. In Ontario today many Iroquois live in five reserves—Cornwall, Gibson, Tyendinaga, Six Nations, and Oneida—but many others live and work in the towns and cities of the province.

## WHEN did the Society exist?

No one knows when the False Face Society began, but it was flourishing when Europeans visited the area in the late 17th century. The missionaries among them did their best to convert the Indians from their old beliefs and gods. About 1800 the medicine societies encountered a new enemy—a native prophet named Handsome Lake who preached a religion of his own, influenced by both Christianity and paganism. He and his followers tried to stamp out all medicine societies, branding and persecuting their members as witches. The False Face Society was driven underground, but continued to meet in secret. Eventually the religion of Handsome Lake grew more conservative even as its popularity spread; and with time the societies were

*The Husk Face Society was another Iroquois curing society which sometimes joined in performances with the False Faces. One of its members made this "grandmother" mask of corn husks.*

*Turtle shell rattles were carried by the False Faces as ritual equipment. To make one, a turtle's tail and legs were removed and its jugular vein cut to drain the blood. The internal organs were extracted and the shell and head cured. Then the leg openings were sewn closed and cherry pits inserted in the body cavity to provide the noise. Finally, splints were secured to the neck to hold the head extended and form a handle.*

able to come out of concealment. The False Face Society continued into the 20th century, but in a far less influential role.

Systematic investigation of the Society began late in the 19th century. The original studies were undertaken by De Costa Smith, and work was continued by William Beauchamp, Louis Morgan, Arthur C. Parker, Harriet Converse, Joseph Keppler, Frank Speck, and William Fenton. David Boyle, of the former Ontario Provincial Museum, collected at the end of the last

century on the Six Nations Reserve masks which are now in the collection of the Department of Ethnology, Royal Ontario Museum. Collections of False Face Society masks may also be found at the National Museum of Canada, Ottawa; the New York State Museum, Albany; the American Museum of National History, New York; and the Museum of the American Indian, New York.

## *Why* were performances held?

The Iroquois believed that the Society of Faces protected them from mortal danger. Without its rituals there would be no way to control the evil forces and the entire community would soon be wiped out. The False Faces were believed to have special powers over the winds, and over certain diseases affecting the head, shoulders, and joints. They were blamed for toothaches, earaches, nosebleeds, chin sores, inflammation of the eyes, and swelling of the face—and could be expected to cure them. Their aid was summoned in two different forms of ceremony: one a public demonstration to prevent disaster to the entire village, the other a private rite to cure an individual.

Each spring and fall public demonstrations were held to wipe out disease, malevolent witches, ill luck, tornadoes, and high winds. The False Faces—preceded by members of the Husk Face Society, wearing corn-husk masks —went through the village visiting every house. The members were stripped to the waist and masked, and as they moved about they shook their turtle shell rattles and shouted terrifying cries. At each house they entered and drove out disease. Then they assembled at the longhouse (the meeting place of the hereditary chiefs) where they banged their rattles on the door and finally burst inside and crawled toward a fire at the centre. At this point the villagers had to pay the performers quickly or they would scatter hot coals in all directions. A speaker first thanked the spirit forces, and burned tobacco. Then he implored the False Faces to protect the people against disease and tornadoes. Next came forward the sick who had dreamt of Faces or had been told by a seer that their illness was caused by Faces. The performers proceeded to cure these patients by blowing ashes onto their heads and rubbing ashes into their hair, by laying hands upon them, and by dancing to the music of chants and rattles. Two Husk Faces sometimes guarded the door during this part of the ceremony to see that no one entered or left. At the end of their performance the False Faces would leave with their payment in tobacco and mush and retire to another part of the village to eat it. Then the Husk Faces might perform. When they had finished they would be given popcorn, and would also leave. Next was the Doorkeepers' dance for the "Great World-Rim Being". Finally, everyone

LEFT *Straight-lipped mask may have been worn by a Doorkeeper.*

RIGHT *Ethnologists have classified some False Face masks by the shape of the mouth.* From left: *whistling mask, straight-lipped mask, hanging mouth mask, smiling mask.*

was expected to join in a round dance directed by one of the Doorkeepers.

At the mid-winter festival the False Faces occasionally performed in the longhouse and treated the sick in a public ritual. They also took part in a celebration reminiscent of our own Hallowe'en. On the fifth and sixth nights of the festival the masks were taken over by little boys and youths. The Faces then were known as Beggars and Thieves, and their wearers went from house to house begging for tobacco. If they received none, they stole food. At the end they proceeded to the longhouse, where they burst inside and crawled on the floor, begging for more tobacco. The men on these occasions wore ragged clothes and carried rattles. When they were given tobacco, they danced until the evening ended.

Most of the Society's performances were, however, private affairs. A sick person would dream of the Faces, or be told by a clairvoyant that he was

possessed of a False Face sickness. He would then ask the Faces, through their leader, for help. The members would don their masks and other ritual equipment. They would go to the sick man's house and bang their rattles upon it, rub their staves up and down the doorframe, and finally burst in, howling and babbling incoherently. There they would dance, blow ashes, and lay hands on the patient. Finally they would receive hot mush and tobacco, and depart.

## WHO belonged to the Society?

Originally the False Face Society was a secret organization. Its members always appeared masked and were known to no one but their leader. A person could join only if he had seen the Faces in a dream, or had been cured by them of a sickness. In either case, he would give a feast for the members, and would then be initiated into their ways. Besides taking part in ceremonies, he would thereafter be expected to give an annual feast. On the other hand, if a man dreamt that he was no longer a False Face he would give a final feast and remove himself from the group. These were the only means whereby membership could be acquired or lost.

The members were all men except for the leader, who was always a woman. (The Iroquois accorded a high place to their women, and traced their ancestry back through their mothers, not through their fathers as we do.) Sometimes there were two women as leaders, in which case one was chosen from each of the moieties, or divisions, within the community. The leader was termed "Mistress of the Band" or "Keeper of the False Faces", and was responsible for certain equipment and the management of the rituals.

Masks were at first owned collectively by the Clan, then by the Society, and most recently by the individual members. Each member usually had a bundle containing a turtle-shell rattle and one or more masks, each decorated with bags of sacred tobacco. When not in use the mask was laid face down with its hair wreathed about the face; the rattle was placed in the hollow at the back of the mask, and the whole package was wrapped inside a cloth head-covering which was worn during rituals. The mask was always laid face down. If the features were uppermost, the mask would be offended, because this was a sign that it was dead.

Members could borrow one another's masks. The masks didn't like to be neglected. If they were not used frequently they would become hungry; then their owners would talk to them, rub their lips with mush, and anoint

*Some masks were painted black on one side of the face and red on the other. They represented a spirit "whose body is riven in twain".*

their faces with sunflower oil. Some masks were especially bad tempered and hard to please. Accordingly they had to be used often and given tobacco.

Late in the 19th century, as the Society emerged from persecution, membership procedures were relaxed. The organization was no longer secret, and the emphasis on dreams for entrance to its ranks became less pronounced. By 1900 on some reserves a man who had the symptoms of False Face Sickness could become a member automatically by giving a feast.

## HOW were the masks made?

A member might inherit his mask. Otherwise he would have to carve one himself, or have it made for him. Generally soft woods were used, among which basswood had a traditional prestige. The carving was carried out according to a prescribed pattern.

The first task was to select a tree containing the spiritual qualities of the "World Tree", symbol of peace and unity. Then a fire was built and in its embers tobacco was placed, a pinch at a time, while prayers were offered to the tree and to the beings whom the mask was to represent. Only then could the carving begin. In the old days, to give the mask power and to maintain within it the spirit of the tree, the first carving was done on the living trunk. Once the face was roughly blocked out the tree was notched above and below the work, and a block of wood cleaved out. The block was then taken home for finishing. In more recent times, this preliminary carving was not carried out: after the prayers a block of wood was simply hewn from the tree and carried back to the village to be shaped.

The mask was carved in high relief with distinct human features which were always distorted or exaggerated. The eyes were deeply set. The nose was usually long and high bridged; on occasion it was bent to one side. Most masks have deeply cut wrinkles around mouth or eyes, and some have a crest of spines on the forehead or nose. The mouth was the most variable feature, and on this basis a number of styles have been described—Crooked Mouth, Straight Lipped, Spoon Lipped, Hanging Mouth, Whistling Mouth, Tongue Protruding, and Smiling Face. The skill employed was considerable, particularly when one remembers that the early Indians had only stone tools with which to work. Carving probably reached its height after the introduction of metal tools.

Once the features were complete, the back of the mask was hollowed out with a crooked knife. Then holes were cut for the eyes, nose and mouth. Often the eyes were encircled with metal to represent supernatural brightness. Next the mask was painted. If its maker had sought the tree in the

*Once the features were carved on the front of the mask, the back was hollowed out. After the arrival of Europeans, this task was made much easier by the use of crooked metal knives mounted on wooden handles.*

morning and had begun work then, the mask was painted red. If the tree had not been found until the afternoon, it was painted black. Some masks were painted both red and black; they were described as "the whirlwind" and are thought to represent "he whose body is riven in twain", half human, half supernatural. These masks were unfamiliar to most Iroquois and may have been recent acquisitions from the Delaware. At the top of each mask strands of horsehair or vegetable fibres were attached. In the old days, corn husk braids might be used instead, or buffalo mane obtained through trade. The Beggar masks sometimes had no such adornment.

*Some masks do not fit any category so far devised. Here are two of them.*

Finally, curative powers were imparted to the new mask by "doctoring". Tobacco was burned, and a small bag of tobacco was attached to the mask while spells were recited.

The art of the False Face Society has never died out. Nor has it remained completely oblivious to modern culture. The traditional styles are still produced—often today for sale rather than for use in rituals. But along with them have appeared from time to time masks which represent a new breed of Face—Felix the Cat, Charlie Chaplin, Mickey Mouse and other current popular folk heroes.

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